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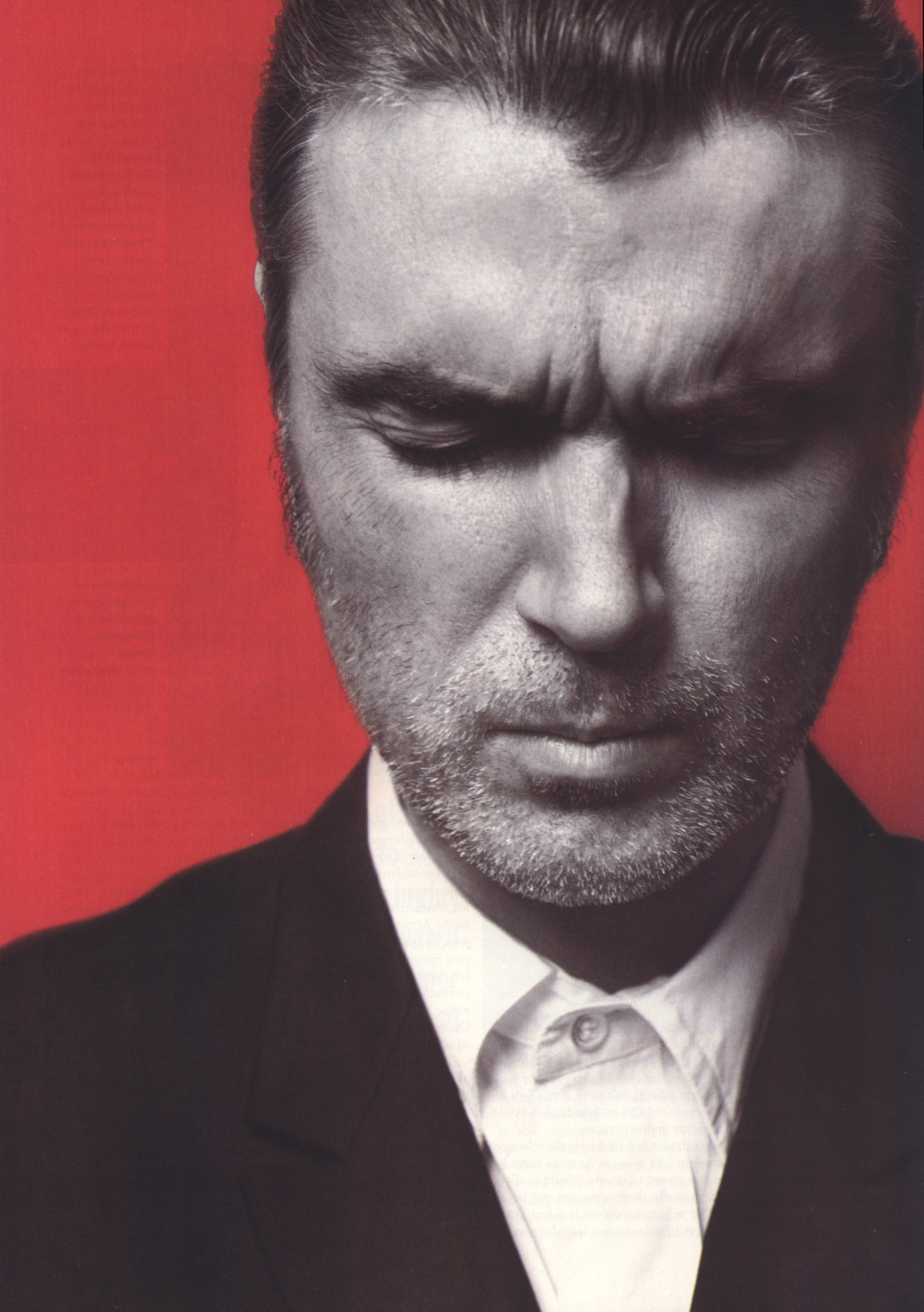

How did I get here?

He took them to the river. He burned down the house. Then he broke up the band (except he didn't tell them). Slippery person? David Byrne talks to **JOHN MILWARD**

Beginnings are easy. Endings are a bitch. Maybe that's why David Byrne has always liked to be in two places, doing two things, at once. Just like his childhood pet dog.

"When I was a kid," says Byrne, his hair slicked back and denim work shirt buttoned to his throat, "we lived on the edge of the suburbs of Baltimore, and my dog always used to take off into the woods. He'd disappear for days and come back covered in cowshit, and I'd have to clean it up. After a while, the dog would stay away longer and longer, and we finally figured that this dog just didn't want to stay with us. So we went out into the country and gave him to a farmer." The name of the dog was Teddy. The cover of Byrne's new album, *ub-ob*, depicts a puppy sitting on a heavenly throne.

For the past seventeen years, Byrne has been the central figure in a celebrated rock group. The name of the band was Talking Heads. Byrne's an ambitious fellow, however, and was always taking off to collaborate on a ballet (Twyla Tharp's *The Catherine Wheel*), a theatrical production (Robert Wilson's *CIVIL warS*), a quirky motion picture (Byrne's directorial debut of 1986, *True Stories*), or to launch a record label, Luaka Bop, to market the esoteric music that caught his fancy. Amidst all this, Byrne landed on the cover of America's influential *Time* magazine under the headline, "Rock's Renaissance Man".

A few months before the release of *ub-ob*, while speaking with the *Los Angeles Times*, Byrne unexpectedly answered the question that had long been on every reporter's lips – "What's happening with Talking Heads?". He said that the group had broken up.

That was news to Jerry Harrison, Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz. They knew that Talking Heads was low on the list of Byrne's priorities, but nonetheless thought that he wanted to keep alive the entity that had made him famous, and that had given him a world of options. What's more, the quartet had just completed four new tracks for a two-disc Talking Heads retrospective, due later this year, entitled *Sand in the Vaseline*.

"To me," laments Harrison, "the thing that was most disturbing was to hear it through the press instead of from David himself. I don't feel that the break up of such a long partnership should be done in that way. Better for it to be handled in a more honest or genteel manner."

Byrne says he has no regrets. "We'd been apart for years, or at least a couple of years," he says, "and we'd been constantly saying to the press, 'Oh, this is just a sabbatical.' To my mind, that was a way of saying that we're still speaking, and we are still speaking, but it created the impression that all our other stuff

STYLIST: STEPHEN EARABINO AT VISAGE, LA. GROOMING PAUL STARR AT PROFILE, LA. FOR CLOTHING DETAILS SEE STYLEFILE PAGE 176.

PHOTOGRAPHS: MICHEL COMTE

was just side projects, that they were a way to mark time until we did another Talking Heads record.

"That wasn't true, so it was time to lay that to rest, to say, 'No, we don't have plans to make another record. We don't want to have a big blow-up, or air our dirty laundry, but we're not about to make another record anytime soon.' I felt that kind of announcement had been postponed for too long."

David Byrne keeps his finger on every detail of his creative life. At the Burbank, California offices of Warner Brothers Records, he stops by the art department to approve the graphic that will decorate the *uh-oh* CD. It is a simple, classical design – two outstretched fingers reaching towards each other from opposite sides of the disc – that suggests both Michelangelo's *God Creating Adam* and Steven Spielberg's *ET*.

Employing an image seeded by both high culture and pop art is vintage Byrne. Talking Heads, after all, rose to fame by epitomising the collegiate, art school side of Manhattan's punk rock scene. Where the Ramones favoured ripped jeans, relentless guitars and studied stupidity, the Heads preferred Oxford-cloth buttoned-downs, quirky melodies and off-hand intelligence.

Byrne, squeaky of voice and scrawny of build, was a most unlikely frontman. Born in Scotland, his family moved to Canada and then to Baltimore by the time he was seven. As a teenager, he played guitar in garage bands and made home recordings using plastic tubs for drums. He spent a year at the Rhode Island School of Design, focused on photography, dropped out, and formed a performance art duo, Bizadi, which featured Byrne stamping on fish, bleaching his hair, and reciting the transcripts of TV game shows. Fortunately, he also met Frantz and Weymouth, who after graduation, followed him to New York for the performance that really mattered. The three shared a loft just down the street from CBGB's, the punk club where Talking Heads first started to shout.

"We hung up clothes to create the illusion of three rooms," recalls Weymouth, who is now married to Frantz, and with whom she has collaborated on two children and a band called Tom Tom Club. "At night, David would call out, 'I can hear you, you know?' "

"You just go through this phase where you reject everything in the past"

At CBGB's, Byrne became a star by doing what came naturally: he was the nerd with nerve. His top button forever fastened under a bobbing Adam's apple, his twitchy persona personified the tension of a cerebral soul succumbing to the earthy allure of rock 'n' roll. Byrne also learned a valuable lesson when the Heads breakout tune turned out, commercially at least, to be not one of his

MICHEL COMTE

This is not my beautiful wife:
A rock star, left. An, 8,000-pound
Asian pachyderm, right.

alienated art songs, but a cover of black vocalist Al Green's 1974 anthem of evangelical rapture, "Take Me to the River".

The Heads quickly began to experiment with the rhythms of African and African-American music (*Remain In Light*), with Byrne later turning to Latin music (*Rei Momo*). "Pop music," he now declares, "touches something that's not that different from what happens in religious rituals. Both can induce a kind of trance. Whether it's a James Brown concert or an African religious ceremony, it taps into the same roots."

Soulful rhythms offered Byrne a cloak of natural cool. To this day, in the privacy of his loft in Manhattan's SoHo, Byrne will turn on Prince's "Controversy", or an African jam by Les Têtes Brulées, and dance until he's sweaty. There are no mirrors for him to assess his moves, for Byrne has come to accept that he dances better in his mind than across his living room floor.

"I have to work to put something across that's simple," he says of his substitution of intellect for instinct. "Maybe it's because I don't have the chops or the gift. But for me, making music is a process that's somewhat intellectual, or intellectualised, even though it also remains physical and on a gut level.

"I don't think it belittles or demeans an experience to try to figure out what's happening to you," he continues, "and I certainly don't think of it as a white person trying to be black. Rather, I think it has to do with accepting a part of myself that maybe I wasn't aware of. In psychological terms, it's about trying to make myself whole through music, which is a pretty enjoyable way of going about it. It's certainly cheaper than therapy."

The variety of Byrne's music, from rock to salsa to orchestral works, has permitted him to wander at will from the ephemeral world of pop to that of high culture.

"David has a foot in both places," observes Spalding Gray, a noted New York monologuist and actor who played with luminous food in *True Stories*. "And that's difficult in our culture. The popularity of his music has allowed him to move horizontally into other avenues of expression."

Passing between two spheres, however, can leave you tripping on the boundaries. Following the release of his 1989 album, *Rei Momo*, Byrne mounted a tour in which he fronted a Latin band, and was booked both into Roseland, a pop ballroom in Manhattan, and into the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

"It was amazing," he recalls, "because the two venues were completely different. At Roseland, it was something like a party. But at the Brooklyn Academy, the audience sat on their hands. They were there to appreciate art, and I must say, it gave me a bad taste in my mouth for the so-called serious audience. I mean, can't these people just have a good time?"

It's a question people have been known to ask of David Byrne himself.

"I think his work is the only fun he has," observes Spalding Gray. "I hate the word workaholic, but David's work is essentially his life."

David Byrne laughs at the autobiographically obsessed Gray's comment, but he declines to deny, nonetheless, that he draws few distinctions between work and play. Serendipity too has always played a role in Byrne's creative life – his interest in Latin music, for example, grew out of enjoying the salsa that drifted through the open windows of his loft.

"David walks a fine line between the abstract and making sense," believes Jerry Harrison, and Byrne is infamous for throwing out a lot of ideas to see which ones stick. The lyrics to *ub-ob* grew out of improvisations he sang as the musicians recorded the instrumental tracks. Later, when it was time to record his vocals, Byrne sifted through the various alternatives to create the final drafts. One song on the album, "Now I'm Your Mom", is about a parent who's gone through a sex-change operation. Different, but rejected lyrics to the same track were about a simple drive in the car.

Similarly, the music of Talking Heads sometimes grew out of jam sessions. (Early on, the other Heads objected when Byrne took credit for songs derived from group improvisations. Subsequently, the music of these songs was attributed to the group, with Byrne credited for lyrics.) On *ub-ob*, however, Byrne brought completed melodies into the studio for songs that he'd written on the guitar during extended practice sessions.

The result is an album that naturally blends Latin and worldbeat rhythms into Byrne's more familiar, albeit idiosyncratic, style of rock. "I think," he says, "for the last few years, I've unconsciously pushed aside everything I've done in the past. It's as if I didn't want to be associated with things like Talking Heads, so the work became in almost no way related to it. So I produced records like the orchestral *The Forest*, *Rei Momo* and the soundtracks (including his Academy Award winning score for Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*).

"It seems to be a common thing that people go through," he continues. "Not that the stuff wasn't good, or doesn't have value, but you just go through this phase where you reject everything in the past. Now I feel that I can accept it again, and that I shouldn't deny that I can write things for drums and guitars."

Jerry Harrison has a theory concerning the timing of Byrne's announcement about the end of Talking Heads. "Perhaps he said the band broke up to free himself – so that he could do a solo tour in which he does a lot of Talking Heads songs. And, of course, he has as much a right to do the songs as anybody. The problem is, we already do them great."

On a shelf in the loft Byrne shares with his wife, Adelle Lutz, and their two-year-old daughter, Malu, is a box holding The Big Suit. An enormous, cream-coloured ensemble padded with layers of wire mesh, it is too large to fit in the closet. David Byrne hasn't worn The Big Suit since the last date of the Talking Heads tour documented by the artful concert film directed by Jonathan Demme, *Stop Mak-*

PHOTOGRAPHS: HUGH BROWN; KOBAL

ing Sense (1984). That means that Byrne hasn't worn it since he gave his last concert as a member of Talking Heads. *Stop Making Sense* captured Talking Heads on the cusp of breaking through to a mass audience, and set the table for the group's most successful album, 1985's *Little Creatures*.

In commercial terms, an apt comparison can be made between the careers of Talking Heads and R.E.M. Both groups were critical favourites and the darlings of the rock underground. R.E.M. nurtured a large following without the muscle of a major label, and took flack for "selling out" when they finally signed with Warner Brothers. Two albums later, R.E.M. is one of the biggest bands in the world. Talking Heads, who were handled by Warner Brothers from the start, were never accused of selling out. Instead, on the verge of the big time, David Byrne took off The Big Suit.

"I guess that was a step I didn't want to take," says Byrne of his refusal to tour behind *Little Creatures*. "I suppose I could see it getting out of hand and I – or we – turning into a one-dimensional version of what we do. It seems that in most cases, when you get more and more famous, and your records sell more, that the depth of what you are gets less and less, and that you become more and more of a commodity with an easily definable label.

"Granted, nobody's telling you what kind of music to make, but you start seeing yourself put forward as this kind of product, as this kind of cartoon. And that's kind of scary, because you think, 'If I go a little bit further than this, I'm going to get stuck, and I'm not going to be able to get back out again.' It's going to be stuck in everybody's head, like somebody who does a TV show for so long that people can never think of him as anything else."

Take that with a pinch of salt. Byrne has been shrewd in using his clout as the leader of a popular rock band to direct a film and make waves in other less commercial artistic fields. He's also a public personality who's recognised the value of cover stories in such rock-reluctant periodicals as the *New York Times Magazine* ("The Thinking Man's Rock Star"). If David Byrne sees the achievement of mass success as artistic hell, he's rarely been afraid to dance with the devil.

Yet Byrne can also play the nervous geek, and some, including Yale Evelev, president of Byrne's Luaka Bop record label, think that Byrne utilises this as the protective device of a public figure. Evelev recalls his first real meeting with Byrne.

"I figured it was like a job interview and that he would lead the discussion. But he didn't really say anything. So we kind of sat there uncomfortably for maybe an hour-and-a-half. And then he said, 'I'm sorry, you'll have to go. I've got to do my laundry.' I left thinking I had been through a nightmare."

I've interviewed Byrne and the other members of Talking Heads on numerous occasions over the past dozen years, including a lunch with Byrne just days before the premiere of *True Stories*. That day, he'd just treated himself to a new shirt, and promptly began showing off its detachable collar. Only later did I discover the reason for Byrne's sartorial splurge – "Rock's Renaissance Man" had made it to the cover of *Time*.

"I left the country while it was on the stands," he says now, "because I couldn't really deal with it. Stuff like that is very, very flattering, and meant in all the best ways, but it's impossible to live up to, so it becomes a curse rather than a blessing. People come up to you and say, 'So, you're the renaissance man?' and it's like, 'Wait a minute. I didn't write that. I'm not bragging.'"

Byrne said just that to the other Talking Heads, who'd become increasingly rankled by the media's emphasis on Byrne – and his willingness to stand in a solo spotlight. During *True Stories*, the press focused more and more on Byrne, and while the group would make one more album, 1988's *Naked*, in reality, by the middle of the decade, the truest story about Talking Heads was that they could barely be described as a band.

Byrne knows that some Talking Heads fans will look at him as an egotistical crab for breaking up the group. Yale Evelev even speculates that some people were happy at the relative failure of *Rei Momo*, thinking that it would send Byrne back to the band. A Warners executive, predicting that *ob-ub* will sell far more than *Rei Momo*, adds that a new Talking Heads album would easily move two million units. Yet Byrne, who's grown accustomed to calling his own shots, saw no alternative but to stay away.

"I get pleasure out of what I do," he says, clearly uneasy commenting on the band's breakup, "and it got to the point that when we were working together, there was such tension in the air that it was uncomfortable and awkward and just not what it's supposed to be about. Granted, some groups have made some of their very best music when various members hated one another, but I don't want to go through that experience."

Beginnings are easy. Endings are a bitch.

I spoke with Byrne in Los Angeles because his wife's sister, Tina Chow, a famous figure in the worlds of restaurants and fashion, was dying of AIDS, and they wanted to be close at hand to lend support and comfort. We met on a Thursday, and Byrne said the strain of the vigil had yet to leave its imprint.

"I'm told by others," he says, "that it will hit me after it happens, like maybe a week later." Tina Chow, 41, died the next day.

After we spoke, Byrne, 39, proceeds to a photo shoot where, much to his surprise, he is asked to pose with an elephant. Tai, an 8,000-pound Asian pachyderm, is nobody's idea of a little creature, yet like Byrne, she's a show business veteran.

"Can you kneel on the floor?" says the photographer.

"Who, me?" asks Byrne.

Soon, both are on the ground.

"Go very close, David," coaches the photographer. "Sit down, like a little boy. Now, slowly, reach with your hand towards her. Hold it, beautiful, stay, stay exactly the way you are."

Seven years after taking off The Big Suit, David Byrne is back in the big top ■

On the verge of the big time, David Byrne made the decision to take off The Big Suit

Captain sensible: in The Big Suit, opposite. Left, as a stranger on the town in *True Stories*.